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In Memoriam Richard De Smet, S.J. (1916-1997)

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THE PASSING AWAY of Richard De Smet on 2 March 1997 marks the loss of one of the twentieth century's giants in Hindu-Christian dialogue. A Belgian by birth, Father De Smet, as he was generally known, or simply Father Richard, was a Jesuit priest and professor who established himself in India from the 1950s onward as a leader in the philosophical encounter of Hindu and Christian thought. His greatest area of expertise was in Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, and much of his life's work was devoted to reconciling what he considered to be the authentic teachings of Śaṅkara with Christian thinking on ontology and liberation.

Father De Smet first arrived in India in 1946 and spent most of the next half century in Pune as professor of philosophy and Indian studies at De Nobili College. During that time he published few books but over six hundred articles and book reviews, almost all of them in English (his mother tongue was French), which have appeared in Hindu and Christian academic journals, Festschriften and encyclopedias. Although his doctoral thesis, "The Theological Method of Śaṅkara" (Rome, 1953) was never formally published, it has enjoyed a wide dissemination among indologists East and West and has convinced many that Śaṅkara was essentially a theologian, not a philosopher. Father De Smet also co-edited and contributed to *Religious Hinduism* (Allahabad: St Paul, orig. 1964), a single-volume summary and Christian appraisal of the salient teachings of Hinduism. This book was thoroughly revised by De Smet not long

before his death. During his final years Father Richard had been working on a historical project dealing with the encounter of Vedānta and Christian theology since the time of Roberto de Nobili (17th century), a study which he unfortunately was never able to complete.

Father De Smet's interest in Indian thought was first kindled by an article on "Brahman and Ātman" he read as a sixteen-year-old in Belgium. This discovery eventually led him to take up seriously the study of Hindu doctrine and spirituality and to enquire as to the possible significance of Vedānta in particular for Christian theology. A product of his time, the young Catholic scholar would first have to immerse himself in the works of St Thomas Aquinas (13th century), whose influence on Catholic systematic theology is comparable to that of Śaṅkara on Hindu metaphysics. De Smet, under the influence of "transcendental Thomism" and the modern turn to the subject, soon recognized not only parallels in the theological methods of Śaṅkara and Aquinas, but he also uncovered convergences in their respective doctrines of divine simplicity and fullness, in their understanding of the ontological relationship between the divine and the world, and in their teaching of liberation through divine knowledge. De Smet also readily acknowledged differences of emphasis in the systems of Śaṅkara and Aquinas as well as outright disagreement.

Father De Smet grew in his regard of Śaṅkara, and his reading of the great *ācārya* sensitized him to new ways of articulating

the interior presence of the Creator to the creature. A few years prior to his death he wrote, "From Śāṅkara I learned to focus on the non-dualistic creative presence in me – and in all creatures – of the absolute *Brahman* as my constant Ground and Cause and thus supreme *Sākṣin* and *Ātman*." But it appears that Father De Smet saw it as his main theological task as a Christian theologian to open non-dualistic thought to the possibility that the highest *Brahman* was capable of love, causation, and grace, but in such a way that the simplicity, plenitude, and transcendence of the divine were thereby in no way compromised. De Smet, accordingly, read Śāṅkara as a realist rather than as an acosmic illusionist. Father Richard was convinced of the compatibility of non-dualistic divine presence with an interpersonal free presence of the divine culminating in love. The second mode of divine presence implied the first, he said.

Father De Smet had close ties with people in many countries, but none more than in India. Deep and lasting friendships with Hindus were forged especially through contact at philosophical and indological societies. He was a life member of the Indian Philosophical Congress and Indian Philosophical Association. Invitations to lecture on both Christian themes and Vedānta took him to Hindu universities in Varanasi, Nagpur, Ahmadabad, Madras, Delhi, and elsewhere. He dialogued with swamis at institutes and ashrams in various

locales, and he frequently found himself engaged in discussion with Muslims, Jains, Parsis, and Sikhs.

De Smet's contribution to the Church in India was enormous. For many years he was the President of the Association of Christian Philosophers of India. He frequently attended ecumenical meetings with representatives of other Christian Churches. He lectured at both Catholic and Protestant institutions of higher learning and conducted retreats for Christians of different denominations. He was a participant in the famous Cuttat meetings of the 1960s, which were devoted to promoting a true spiritual encounter between Hindus and Christians. Father De Smet counted among his friends such contemplative scholars as Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux), Raimundo Panikkar, Dom Bede Griffiths, and Sister Sara Grant. He influenced many other Christian students of Vedānta worldwide.

A Festschrift is in preparation (to be published by E. J. Brill) which will posthumously honour Richard De Smet. Fittingly, all of the contributions seek to offer new perspectives on Śāṅkara, and the contributors are Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian. It is expected that a De Smet archive will soon be established in Pune where future scholars will have access to the writings, lecture materials, unfinished research projects, and voluminous correspondence of this gentle and good-natured man of God.